Designing a Cross-Cultural Course

By Hans Straub

To enter another culture with only the vaguest notion of its underlying dynamics reflects not only a provincial naiveté but a dangerous form of cultural arrogance" (Barnlund 1991:73).

In response to views like this, publishers are including cultural information in their ESL texts, and teachers are beginning to recognize the importance of the underlying dynamics of a culture in L2 communication. Such steps are laudable, but they may fall short of the mark when it comes to actually equipping students with the cognitive skills they need in a second-culture environment.

From country to country, social taboos, politics, and religious traditions and values differ. These cultural variables need to be respected if students are to benefit from new experiences. Yet the commercial market today does not seem to have a universally applicable intercultural communication (IC) program or text that is suitable for culturally divergent student populations. To compensate for the lack of IC materials, instructors often need to develop their own IC courses that meet local standards of acceptability. Once instructors understand the basic concepts of cultural comparison, they can develop appropriate learning materials.

This article will outline a 60-hour course in intercultural communication that develops those cognition skills needed to understand life in foreign countries. The initial part of the course is intended to heighten the participant's awareness of his or her own culture; the latter part focuses on assumptions, values, and behaviors of the target culture — in our case, the middle class, American way of life. Although the course described herein is designed for culturally homogeneous classes in the Middle East, it could serve as a model for multicultural groups anywhere.

Basic Parameters

To begin, we need to recognize the parameters within which we operate and to consider our particular situations. We also must decide on cultural elements that may be too sensitive to be discussed in class. These may include delicate matters such as male-female relationships, controversial political issues like revolutions, and volatile subjects like alcohol, sexual orientation, and drugs. Topics that we often discuss in our own societies can create major problems when raised in classes abroad. Consequently, we need to identify those sensitive topics and keep them in mind when designing our course.

Part One: Home Culture

Because it is not always clear exactly what ought to be covered in an IC course, I will suggest topics and sequencing that have worked well for me. Part one (a 20-hour course) begins with modules of instruction that allow students to explore their own cultures before venturing into unknown territories (Grove 1982). The first third of this course raises the participants' awareness that they are members of a particular culture. By exploring their own culture, students acquire

the vocabulary with which to describe values, expectations, behaviors, traditions, customs, rituals, forms of greeting, cultural signs, and identity symbols familiar to them. Once students know how to talk about their culture, they are ready to discuss the values, expectations, and traditions of others with a higher degree of intellectual objectivity.

Defining culture

We begin by defining what culture is. To do this we allow students to brainstorm freely but lead them to the ideas that culture is the total way of life of a group or society; that all humans living in groups have cultures; that there are no "inferior" or "superior" cultures; and that cultures are formed to meet human needs.

Defining human needs

Once we have a definition of culture, we explore the concept of human needs in general. Abraham Malsow (1962) has suggested "higher order" and "lower order" needs that all cultures try to meet. Lower order needs are physical requirements such as food, water, and shelter; whereas formal education, self-development, self-fulfillment, and so forth, are higher order needs.

Once we have identified universal human needs, we discuss what needs are particular to the students' own culture. These might include security, religious requirements, or political imperatives unique to our students. The aim of the exercise is to instill in students the sense that they are members of a culture and that their way of life has evolved to meet particular needs.

Behaviors

Having arrived at a characterization of culture and having explored human needs, we then relate needs and culture to behaviors. In one or two units, students become aware that behaviors are culturally prescribed norms intended to meet expectations or needs shared by members of a culture. They learn, for instance, that certain social occasions demand specific behaviors and speech-acts.

For this module, I use an exercise called "What's Rude?" in which participants identify rude and polite behaviors appropriate in their culture. We discuss what to say and do when calling on strangers, friends, elders, and social superiors. However, we only mention briefly how members of other cultures respond in similar situations. Here, the goal is for students to become aware that norms of behavior are culturally defined and varied. We feel that they need to learn the cultural codes of their society before they discover the codes of conduct of the target culture.

Friendship

Next, we focus on friendship as a culturally defined concept. We discuss how, when, where, and with whom people typically become friends in their culture. Questions to explore might be what determines friendship; whether friendship is a practical matter, an emotional bond, or a relationship of mutual obligations; and if men and women can be friends. This kind of exploratory exercise can also be done with kin relationships in general: Who owes what to whom in the kinship system? By brainstorming in groups, students begin to realize that there are patterns of expectations, prescribed behaviors, and obligations attached to social relationships, and that there is purpose and predictability to interpersonal relationships.

Cultural symbols and rituals

For variety, our course has included signs and symbols (identity symbols) of the culture. To teach this we use a show-and-tell format in which students explain meaningful objects, items particular to a culture such as a rice bowl, chop sticks, the national flag,

or an animal used as a national symbol. Participants explain what objects represent or mean, and the rules, if any, for their uses.

We then examine cultural rituals and any social values that produce such rituals. We explore the procedures, symbols, and prescribed behaviors of common events like weddings, funerals, rites of passage, festivals, and so forth. These are related to human needs and culturally defined values and expectations. The goal of this unit is to relate cultural behaviors to the things people value, expect, and commonly take for granted.

Methodology

The methodology used in the first part of the course is student-centered: students hypothesize, brainstorm, discuss, conclude, and inform the instructor of their findings. In other words, the students teach the teacher. This approach makes sense, especially when the instructor is not a member of the local culture or when the instructor finds himself or herself in a multicultural classroom. The benefits of this approach are a high degree of student motivation, a great amount of oral language practice, and student-generated learning. Students work in groups of threes or fours on everything, except perhaps the show-and-tell presentations. Participants are graded on group/class participation, on the quality of presentations, and on a terminal quiz on concepts taught in the course.

Part Two: Target Culture

Hitherto, we have focused on the students' culture. Our intention has been to raise the students' awareness of their own way of life, to acquaint them with some basic cultural concepts, to give them vocabulary with which to talk about culture, and to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses. Our next objective is more daunting: to create an awareness of the building blocks of our particular worldviews in relation to other worldviews. Our purpose is to foster a certain degree of understanding of the target culture from an insider's perspective—an empathetic view that permits the student to accurately interpret foreign cultural behaviors.

We cover nonverbal communication, cultural assumptions, values, expectations, stereotypes, and cultural adjustment or culture shock (Paige 1993). In a 40-hour component, we emphasize how those elements of our worldview can become roadblocks to intercultural understanding and how they can undermine the formation of an intelligent perspective of a foreign culture. We discuss and analyze critical incidents to see how our worldviews occasionally collide and leave people perplexed and offended (Storti 1994).

Nonverbal communication

In our module on nonverbal communication, we have chosen various topics such as dress, colors, and body language (facial expressions, posture, gestures, and proxemics). By understanding how cultures and subcultures or co-cultures use these signs to communicate, we can discover a

person's social status, group membership, and approachability. We use pictures and videos of people interacting normally as our teaching tools. Students are asked to speculate on the significance of various styles of clothing, the symbolic meanings of colors, gestures, facial expressions, and the physical distance people unconsciously put between each other. We question students as to how these nonverbal communication patterns are similar to or different from those of their culture and how they can be misunderstood. The goal is to teach participants that these patterns vary from one culture to the next.

Basic reality assumptions

Also in the second part of the course, we teach the most challenging concept—basic "reality assumptions." In this module, course participants try to define which values or ideas are behind our values, perspectives, attitudes, and consequently our expectations and behaviors. We explore what our students, in their culture, assume to be true about the world and the way things work, and we compare and contrast these with American assumptions about reality. Basic premises about time, progress, the purpose of life, human nature, God, the invisible world, and many other things may be similar or remarkably different from culture to culture.

The aim of our discussions is to recognize some basic perspectives that underlie our interpretations of the world and to acknowledge that such assumptions can differ. What we hope emerges from our discussions is that, contrary to what we have been taught, truths or assumptions are not necessarily universal. What is real or true to one group may not be real or true for Americans. Recognizing that there are essential differences in worldviews permits students to respond more effectively when cross-cultural communication breaks down, as it most certainly can (Stewart and Bennett 1991).

Cultural values

Next we center on things, qualities, or abstract ideas that a culture considers valuable. We explore the students' cultural values and compare and contrast them with mainstream American values. We do this by examining such popular proverbs and sayings as "All that glitters is not gold," "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours," "No pain, no gain," since cultural values are embedded in sayings. As many cultures have similar sayings that transmit attitudes and values, you will find students eager to compare such memorable maxims. The point, however, is to note the cultural values that are associated with the sayings and proverbs.

In keeping to our goal of raising student awareness of cultural values, we examine the qualities that we admire in our heroes. These, like other determiners, are culturally defined even though they may be universally shared. Values such as perseverance, innovativeness, individualism, cooperation, self-motivation, loyalty, friendship, public service, and piety may be exemplified through biographies of famous men and women who have contributed to a society. We discuss the biographies of American heroes from all ethnic backgrounds who embody values shared by Americans. What emerges from this exercise is an awareness of the values of the target culture and the degree to which we share such values.

Human cognition

To prepare for our discussion on stereotyping, we have a module on human cognition. The mind tends to jump to conclusions and acts on them based upon a minimal amount of sensory input

(Summerfield 1993). Before all the data are known, we have already attributed meaning to our impressions and find ourselves acting on these, often to learn that we have been mistaken. To demonstrate that we see what we expect to see out of habit rather than what is actually there, we show photographs, for example, of street scenes, and elicit various interpretations which reflect what individuals assume is happening. Such demonstrations illustrate that our perceptions can be erroneous and that we are culturally conditioned to expect things to be a certain way. This lesson prepares our students for the module on stereotyping.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are gross simplifications that neatly sum up members of other groups or cultures. Such impressions prevent a more profound understanding of who others are as individuals and as members of social groups. Stereotypes are probably the most difficult stumbling block to overcome for any person in a foreign country, and as such, the topic requires considerable attention in IC courses.

First, students need to learn what stereotypes are and how they interfere with communication. Students discuss common impressions they have of various nationals and then are asked where these impressions come from. The next step is to find out whether students have any firsthand knowledge of foreign nationals and whether foreigners really have these characteristics. It becomes apparent that while there may be a kernel of truth to stereotypes, they do not adequately represent individuals. Students then learn that stereotyping prevents our dealing effectively with members of other societies.

For discussion sessions, teachers may use films and other visual media showing members of the target culture. By becoming aware of their preconceptions about the target culture, students will be able to overcome stereotypes.

Culture shock

We also have a module on culture shock and adjusting to a foreign way of life. Students seldom know what to expect when they go to another country. In order to prepare them for this experience and to teach some coping skills, our course includes the video entitled Cold Water by Noriko Ogami (1988), which we show in manageable segments. We ask students to identify stereotypical impressions of Americans. Then we examine common patterns of cultural adjustment—the emotional patterns of highs and lows that students would have to deal with while abroad (Weaver 1993).

Cross-cultural communication

Finally, in the latter part of the course, students learn to analyze incidents that involve cross-cultural misunderstandings—conflicts of values and expectations. Instructors write scripts about common interpersonal occurrences in which characters from different cultures have divergent interpretations of what is said or done. Students must identify the communication problem in the incident, determine the values involved, and correct the misunderstanding. The objective is to teach participants to analyze misunderstandings in cultural terms and to help them learn to deal effectively with similar situations.

Pedagogical approach

The focus in the second part of the course is the free exchange of interpretatio0ns and ideas. While the instructor may be the authority on the target culture, he or she cannot possibly anticipate all of the difficulties students encounter in comprehending another culture. Hence, student-centered talk and student-centered activities are particularly important. As in the first part of the course, students need constant reminders that the cultural concepts they are learning have practical relevance to their ultimate goal—cultural adjustment and a successful experience abroad. Although teachers may vary the types of exercises they use and substitute the cultural topics discussed, we advise contrasting cultural values in the latter part of the program when students are more knowledgeable and have a greater degree of objectivity.

Conclusion

By custom designing their own intercultural communication course, teachers can meet the particular needs of their students. However, it is important to follow the recommended sequencing of topics, beginning with an exploration of the home culture before contrasting values, expectations, and behaviors of the target culture. Once we are aware of how culture determines our lifestyles and behaviors, we are all in a better position to reach across our many borders.

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Hans Straub is a course designer, teacher, and coordinator at the College Preparatory Center, Saudi Aramco, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.